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Take time out
James Campbell
jamesca@deakin.edu.au

IT seems these days that everyone is busy. We rush around incessantly, working, commuting and communicating with little time to ourselves.

Modern life appears to be making machines of us all.

The common refrain is: "I do not have time", "I have no time for myself" or perhaps "I have too much work I have no time for anything else".

Work seems to colonise all available space in our lives. With the growth of Information and Communications Technology, the availability and constancy of email, and the demands of work we appear to have created a culture that is characterised by incessant and unrelenting demands to "stay in touch", "remain relevant" and "increase performance".

Time itself is as they say "money" and cannot be wasted. And what then is the definition of "waste"?

It appears to be that waste is anything that is "unproductive". Perhaps Man finally has become a machine as argued by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in his classic 18th-century work Man a Machine.

Perhaps as with how we judge machines, all that really counts is how "productive" we are.

I sit writing this piece having just returned from a small coffee shop a few blocks away from my home.

The coffee shop is a small establishment that serves good coffee, an assortment of cakes and biscuits, and is run by an engaging owner called Yousef.

He discusses with me the relative merits of Daniel Lanois' music, the different ways to make zaatar, which is an Arabic herbal mix applied on bread, and finally, knows very well my love of espresso coffee.

Why you ask would I spend time in such an "unproductive" manner when the demands of work are so relentless and unforgiving?

Why spend time discussing zaatar and music over good coffee when I should be maintaining my productivity!

The answer to this question is I think threefold and it has to do with our humanity, our values and our productivity. Firstly, our humanity: Its quality in part lies in the quality and depth of our experiences and engagements as human beings.

Our capacity to develop taste, converse and hold conversations, and appreciate the aesthetic sense that is so important for us is a critical aspect of our humanity.
The reduction of our lives to the demands of work and constantly being "productive", and the oversimplification of the meaning of what is productive to the immediately measurable and quantifiable lead inexorably to a diminution of our human capacities.

The incessant demands of industry that do not recognise the necessity of our human need for aesthetic pleasure, relaxation and just plain good conversation reduce us to being mere machines for an unrelenting economy.

In short we lose our humanity when we reduce our lives simply and only to work.

Second, the issue of values: if as I argue above we lose something, our basic humanity, if everything is reduced to "work, work, work" then it seems to follow that we also begin to lose sight of our values during this process.

The demands of progress and the need to compete and produce take our eyes off the deeper issues, which define us as human beings: our capacity to realise meaning.

Now it is true that through work we can realise meaning and often work provides us with a sense of fulfilment and achievement, which is necessary for us in the maintenance of our self-esteem, and sense of self-worth.

However, if all we do is work, and we reserve no time for friends, family or that simple coffee then when will we have time to reflect upon things not reducible to work or money?

Time for reflection, time to enjoy art or "to smell the coffee", time to realise our faith, time to live?

The colonisation of our lives by the logic of economic productivity and the constant demands that work is making upon many of us is leaving us unable to spend time with our families, our loved ones or even dare I say it with our local coffee shop.

If this is the case, which for many of us is increasingly so, then how do we answer the question of what we value most?

Finally and perhaps paradoxically, our "unproductive" time is perhaps the most productive time of all. This is so for two essential reasons.

Firstly, time out gives you rest. No one can be productive all the time and there is a diminishing rate of returns on how productive we are after a certain period. We need rest. Taking a rest in fact helps to increase your productivity because it helps us avoid the burnout that often accompanies overwork and the stress that comes with it.

On top of this, time out to enjoy life, listen or play music, smell the coffee, sit and have a conversation, play sport, spend time with family or attend to our faith, provides us the stimulus for our creativity. Without this stimulus, our work becomes increasingly stale, unoriginal and dull.

I could not have written this column without going to my local coffee shop, listening to the music and realising how good zaatar tasted in the morning.
In doing this I maintained my social world, enjoyed good music and ultimately and paradoxically increased my productivity!

I realised that unlike La Mettrie, I do not think Man is a machine. Rather I think we all need time with our families, our loved ones and with ourselves.

Without this, all our talk of values and progress seems hollow.

NB: The writer is a Lecturer in Education in Australia and author of Understanding Reform and the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Agenda: Discussion and Critique released by USM Press, 2010. Email him at jamesca@deakin.edu.au